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The List, the Archive, the Acceleration of History

Abstract: This paper examines the role of the list and practices of listing in the archival and communication of information and knowledge. Specifically, it seeks to elucidate the role and function of the list in relation to the recent 'archival turn' of a contemporary culture that Pierre Nora describes as experiencing the 'acceleration of history.'
Résumé : Cette communication examine le rôle de la liste et des pratiques d'élaboration de listes dans l'archivage et la communication de l'information et de la connaissance. Plus précisément, on cherche à comprendre le rôle et les fonctions de la liste en relation avec le récent « tournant archivistique » d'une culture contemporaine que Pierre Nora décrit comme étant l'expérience d'une « accélération de l'histoire ».

I.

We are surrounded by lists: online, offline; at work, at play; in 'high' culture, in 'low' culture; in conversation, in print. A mass of countdowns, rankings, and 'best of the all-time' collections of cultural information has steadily expanded over the last 15 years, as the list has emerged as a communicative device *par excellence,* ubiquitous across all media forms. Myriad cultural access points such as television, the internet, radio, and print, appear to offer an abundance and heterogeneity of choice for the contemporary subject. More likely, however, this is a pseudo-heterogeneity that serves to mask a process of increasing homogenization. That is, over time, each access point has co-opted and become increasingly reliant upon presenting information via lists. As a consequence, the collection, organization, and communication of cultural information has become streamlined and standardized according to the internal logic of the list.

Exponential increases in the speed, choice and flow of information have facilitated this cultural shift toward the list. Both producers and consumers have turned to the list, the former as a way to quickly communicate information, the latter as a strategy for effectively navigating this information deluge. Examples are countless as countdowns inundate us at every turn – whether in film, such as the AFI's '100 Years…100 Movies' countdown; or in literature, where there is Time magazine's 'All-Time 100 Novels;' even historical moments, persons, and events are being collected and/or ranked, as we can see in the BBC's 100 'Greatest Britons,' and closer to home, the CBC's '100 Greatest Canadians.' There is, perhaps, nothing as consistently ubiquitous across (and about) various forms of media in our culture as the list. This situation has profound effects: by altering the way we receive and use this information, the list has recalibrated not just the experience of contemporary identity or subjectivity, but also our overall sense of cultural history, heritage and/or memory, and indeed the very terms of our intersubjective socio-political relations.

Popular music seems a suitable terrain on which to observe these processes for a number of reasons. First, its long-standing tradition of using lists such as sales charts and year-end Top-10s in a variety of ways: as a summary of the state of the field; as a marketing device; as a shared communicative field between producers and consumers; as

an active archive of social musical experience. Such list-functions have been an important, yet often overlooked component in the documentation of popular music history. Second, the last decade has seen the arrival of what has become the dominant mediator of the contemporary musical encounter, the iTunes play*list*. And third, an abundance of lists with a more overtly historical tenor has emerged in critical and populist musical discourse, more experientially ambitious than traditional sales charts or top-10s. Such critical or pseudo-critical lists seek to archive, compare, and rank according to 'importance' or 'influence' not just various historical and/or contemporary songs, artists or albums, but also urban scenes, genres, fashions, even *actual historical moments*. What is more, emergent forms of collaborate information/knowledge projects, most notably wikipedia, increasingly enable and encourage the unquestioned use of lists to prop up aesthetic claims – legitimating a musical object or artist's relevancy, value, or importance.

Among the questions that emerge from this context: what historical narratives are being authored through such lists, and who is authoring them? How do these emergent historical narratives and canons influence both consumption habits, and conventions by which consumers shape taste and value judgements? How do such conventions ultimately affect the music fan's articulation of a narrative of identity or self – whether through a negation of the list's authority, or an affirmation of it? Further, to what extent is the mediation of such lists functioning as a new process of canonization? And what does this will to history say about our relationship to a collective cultural past or memory?

The latter of these questions will be taken up in this case study, which is an attempt to situate the list in relation to the archive. Specifically, I hope to elucidate the role and function of the list in the contemporary cultural context, in which is experienced what Pierre Nora (1989) describes as the 'acceleration of history,' and to which corresponds a so-called 'archival turn.'[i] This study seeks first to situate the list within cultural memory/history discourse, demonstrating the extent to which the list and the predilection for listing both contribute to and reflect the condition of accelerated history under late capital, necessitating an exploration of the convergence of subjects, objects and lists in this process. Second, the study seeks to account for the relationship between the list and the archive by updating and extending Jack Goody's pioneering work on the dialectic dimension of the list, and its relationship to knowledge/information, as a communicative device and cultural formation. This dialectic allows for an understanding of the extent to which the list enacts, simultaneously, the creation of new knowledge bases, and the implicit challenge to extant ones (Goody 1977). Ultimately, my argument follows Goody in conceptualizing the list as a communicative device that, because it is definitively *not oral*, possesses an inherent administrative functionality, a functionality that thereby enables the list's *archival capacity*. Further, this implicit capacity for archival in both the list's written, and other visual/material forms, is what has ensured its survival over time; that is, through multiple epistemological shifts.

II.
If the ubiquitous multitude of lists in contemporary culture in fact functions to effectively establish what mainstream culture considers 'valuable' or 'important' in popular music, lists therefore select not just the content, but also the criterion for inclusion or exclusion into these prestigious categories of value. As a result, Foucault permeates the project: his conceptualization of historical knowledge as discursively constructed aids in an analysis of the contemporary underlying social conditions of 'truth' (*épistémè),* which allow the

list to function as an acceptable communicative and historical device; as a 'discursive formation' (Foucault 1970, 1972). In such a context, one is inclined to suggest that lists only to entrench existing power relations, dictating not just how and who may deliver judgments, but the very ontology of the discussion itself: as Kenneth Werbin notes, the list always *serves* (Werbin 2008). Most of the small but insightful literature that deals with lists addresses this basic problem (Le Goff 1992, Bourdieu 1996, Sharkey 1997, Vismann 2008). Indeed, collecting historical information in a list seems in many respects to be the kind of annihilation of collective memory that Nora identifies as symptomatic of a society that cannot remember *anything*, because it seeks to document *everything* (Nora 1989).

The list can certainly be seen as a communicative device that is deployed in order *to order*: lists make sense of the world, they facilitate the development of knowledges and discourses, they organize experience. These functions can be deeply contradictory, however, and illuminating the wider political and historical implications of the list addresses the extent to which it can and has served power interests – both in the acquisition of power, and its retention. The list functions thus particularly in its ability to control populations, establishing (or at least re-affirming) social categories and relations by placing human subjects next to one another in a list, and thereby *creating* relations between divergent subjects. The most horrific extension of this process comes quickly to mind when thinking about the proliferation of lists in census taking and other population administration tactics used in Nazi Germany, tactics that ultimately served to de-humanize subjects and facilitate the pursuit of the Final Solution (Agamben 1998, Black 2001, Aly and Roth 2004, Werbin 2008). But even in a less extreme formulation, it is impossible to think of labour under capitalism (whether material or immaterial) without the organizing capability of the list. The list can be seen therefore a profound tool in administering both the productive capacity of a society, and indeed the experience of subjectivity in such a society.

However, some work does counter this totalizing view of lists. In addition to the work of Goody, Berube (2000) and Poletti (2008) point to listing practices online and in zine culture, respectively, as sites in which to observe the articulation of emergent possible subjectivities. Umberto Eco celebrates the long history of lists as descriptive and figurative models in literature and visual art, celebrating what he calls the 'poetics of the list': the productive tension between the two forms of list, those of 'everything included' (i.e. a finite list) and those of 'etcetera' (i.e. an infinite list) (Eco 2009). This is a tension that is certainly evident in popular music lists, as both infinite/un-ranked/non-hierarchical lists, as well as ranked/hierarchical/countdown-style lists flourish. Further, much can be said positively about the potential for lists to function cartographically, allowing us to navigate the information deluge that immerses us every day of our digital lives. By distilling and organizing much of this material, both listmaking and list reading serve as access points for fans into the musical conversation. Indeed, the will to history of many such lists seems to be precisely what Huyssen describes as "the turn toward memory [which] is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (Huyssen 2008: 18). I plan to explore such issues with more depth at the annual CAIS conference.

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[i] Variously theorized as an 'archive fever' (Derrida 1995); an 'archival impulse' (Foster 2004); a 'memory boom' (Huyssen 2003); among others.

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